I am struggling along with a book MS long in arrears. Perhaps I should mention that one chapter of this book is entitled “The Cultural Role of Rhetoric.” In this I try to prove the proposition that in the social realm dialectic unaided by rhetoric is subversive. Then I try to show that Modern (or General) Semantics is a modern attempt to exalt pure dialectic at the expense of traditional rhetoric, and that this is one of the things eating away the fibre of our society.

—Richard M. Weaver to Ralph T. Eubanks
September 2, 1959

“Speech,” Weaver argued in Ideas Have Consequences, “is the vehicle of order.” He later developed this premise as the major thesis of “The Cultural Role of Rhetoric.” In his view, rhetoric is the vital force in the maintenance of the internal order of spirit and the external order of society. In the explication of this view, Weaver associated rhetoric with “memory” and with “sentiment.” Rhetoric, he insisted, deals with questions that “arise out of history.”

It is rhetoric, therefore, which “speaks to man in his whole being and out of his whole past and with reference to values which only a human being can intuit.” Here then is a cardinal tenet of Weaver’s credo: rhetoric conceived as the “most humanistic of all the disciplines.” Thus it was that he assigned to rhetoric a special role in resolving the cultural crisis of our time. In Weaver’s “restored man” dialectic and rhetoric would go hand in hand “as the regime of human faculties intended they should.”

The Cultural Role of Rhetoric

One of the most alarming results of the disparagement of memory is the tide of prejudice which is currently running against rhetoric. Everyone is aware that the old-style orator is no more, and even those speeches which suggest traditional oratory arouse skepticism and suspicion. The discourse that is favored today is without feeling and resonance, so that it is no exaggeration to say that eloquence itself has fallen into disfavor. Moments of great crisis do indeed encourage people to listen for a while to a Churchill or a MacArthur, and this is proof of the indispensability of rhetoric when men feel that great things are at stake. But today when the danger is past, they lapse again into their dislike of the rhetorical mode, labeling all discourse which has discernible emotional appeal “propaganda.”

Rhetoric is involved along with memory in this trend because rhetoric depends upon history. All questions that are susceptible to rhetorical treatment arise out of history,
and it is to history that the rhetorician turns for his means of persuasion. Now simultaneous with the loss of historical consciousness there emerges a conviction that man should dispense with persuasive speech and limit himself to mere communication. Viewed in the long perspective this must be considered a phase of the perennial issue between rhetoric and dialectic. But great danger lies in the fact that the present attitude represents a victory for a false conception of the role of dialectic in cultural life. States and societies cannot be secure unless there is in their public expression a partnership of dialectic and rhetoric. Dialectic is abstract reasoning upon the basis of propositions; rhetoric is the relation of the terms of these to the existential world in which facts are regarded with sympathy and are treated with that kind of historical understanding and appreciation which lie outside the dialectical process.

The current favor which rational and soulless discourse enjoys overt rhetoric is a mask for the triumph of dialectic. This triumph is directly owing to the great prestige of modern science. Dialectic must be recognized as a counterpart in expression in language of the activity of science. We can affirm this, despite certain differences between them, because they are both rational and they are both neutral. The first point we need not labor; the second is important for this discussion because it is the quality of neutrality in science which has caused many moderns to suppose that it should be the model for linguistic discourse.

We hear it regularly asserted that the investigations and conclusions of science are not made to serve ad hoc causes. It is usually granted that the scientist is indifferent to the potencies which he makes available. His work is finished when he can say, “Here are these potencies.” He is a solver of intellectual problems, as is evidenced by his reliance upon number.

Now, in a fashion similar enough to make the resemblance consequential, the dialectician is neutral toward the bearing of his reasoning upon actuality. The dialectician says, “If you assume these propositions, you must face these implications,” and so forth. His work is with logical inference, not historical discovery. If we define dialectic in its pure form, we are compelled to say that it is indifferent to truth, or at least that its truth is something contained in its own operation. Professor Mortimer Adler has pointed out that “truth when it is taken to mean an extrinsic relation of thinking to entities beyond the process of thought cannot be achieved by dialectical thinking.” What is said here assumes the possibility of a pure dialectician, and it may be doubted, because of the nature of things, that such a person could exist. But the question I am here pursuing is whether one can become too committed to dialectic for his own good and the good of those whom he influences. I expect to show presently through a famous instance how this can happen.

My thesis is that a too exclusive reliance upon dialectic is a mistake of the most serious consequence because dialectic alone in the social realm is subversive. The widespread overturning of institutions in recent history and the frustration man now feels over his inability to guide his destiny begin, at the most profound level, with the disastrous notion that dialectic, unaided by rhetoric, is sufficient for human counsels. We have heard it contended by many leaders of opinion that if man will only avoid emotional

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approaches and will utilize science in coping with his problems, he will be able to conduct his affairs with a success hitherto unknown. That is to say, if he will rely upon a dialectic which is a counterpart to that of science in arriving at his decisions, he will have the advantage of pure knowledge whereas in the past he has tried to get along with a mass of knowledge and feeling. The point of this chapter will be the contrary: to give up the role of rhetoric and to trust all to dialectic is a fast road to social subversion.

For the introduction of this argument I am going back to the trial and condemnation of Socrates. Certain features of this extraordinary incident will help to illuminate the difficult problem of the relation of dialectic to rhetoric and of both of these to practical policy.

The reflective portion of mankind has wondered for centuries how so brilliant and civilized a people as the Greeks could condemn to death this famous philosopher. It would be blasphemous for anyone to suggest that the Athenian assembly did not commit a dreadful injustice. But since the condemnation occurred, there must have been some cause; and I think the cause lies much deeper than the fact that a few men with whom Socrates associated turned out badly and deeper than the resentment of a few Athenians whose vanity he had wounded through his questioning. The people of Athens had a case against Socrates which can be understood and elucidated. Set against their own attitudes and behavior, the case may not look very good to us, and we can still say that they put to death the most virtuous man in the city. Yet they had a certain cause, possibly more felt than reasoned out, but enough to account practically for the final judgment.

Socrates has come down to us as one of the greatest ethical teachers of all times. But by the Athenians who indicted him he was charged with being a subverter and a corrupter. Before we set down these two ascriptions as wholly incompatible, let us remember that Socrates was also the greatest dialectician of his time. We who study him at this remote date are chiefly impressed with the ethical aspect of his teaching, but those who listened to him in Athens may have been more impressed by his method, which was that of dialectic. By turning his great dialectical skill upon persons and institutions, Socrates could well have produced the feeling that he was an enemy of the culture which the Greeks had created. He was, in one sense of course, the highest expression of it, but the kind of skill he brought to a peak of development needs harmonizing with other things. When a dialectic operates independently of the concrete facts of a situation, it can be destructive. These facts are not determinative logically of the course which the dialectical inquiry must take, but they are the ground from which it must operate in actual discourse. A dialectic which becomes irresponsibly independent shatters the matrix which provides the base for its operation. In this fact must have lain the real source of the hostility toward Socrates. Nietzsche has perceived this brilliantly in a passage of The Birth of Tragedy: "From this point onward Socrates conceives it his duty to correct existence; and with an air of irreverence and superiority, as the precursor of an altogether different culture, art, and morality, he enters single-handed into a world, to touch whose very hem would give us the greatest happiness."

We must remember that Socrates begins the Apology by telling his auditors that they are not going to hear a clever

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speaker; that is to say, they are not going to hear an orator of the kind they are accustomed to; if Socrates is a good speaker, it is not in the style of his accusers. They have said nothing that is true; he proposes to speak only the truth. Further along, he professes to be “an utter foreigner to the manner of speech here.” Obviously this is not the way in which a speaker consolidates himself with an audience; it betokens alienation rather than identification. Socrates has in effect said at the beginning, “Your way is not my way.”

Thereafter Socrates gives an account of the origin of his unpopularity. He had gone around to men who were reputed to be wise and had questioned them about matters of which they were supposed to have knowledge. He found it easy to prove that they were not wise but ignorant or that their knowledge was so confined that it could scarcely be termed wisdom. Among those who underwent his examination were public men, or political leaders, and poets. This story is too well known to readers of the Dialogues to need rehearsing in detail. Suffice it to say that Socrates gives a candid relation of how his dialectic had irritated important elements in the population. But it is to the role of dialectic in the defense itself that I wish to direct chief attention. For Socrates, when his life was at stake, could not or would not give up the instrumentality by which he had been offending.

Let us look at the literal charge which has come down to us. “Socrates is a transgressor and a busybody, investigating things beneath the earth and in the heavens, and making the worse appear the better reason and teaching these things to others.” Added to this was the further charge that he did not recognize the gods which were acknowledged by the state but insisted on introducing an idea of new spirit-

ual beings. No doubt there are several ways in which this latter charge could have been answered. But the way in which Socrates chose to meet it was exactly the way to exacerbate the feelings of those whom he had earlier offended. It is significant that at one point he feels compelled to say to the assembly: “Please bear in mind not to make a disturbance if I conduct my argument in my accustomed manner.” Here is the passage which follows that request:

**Socrates**: You say what is incredible, Melitus, and that, as appears to me, even to yourself. For this man, O Athenians! appears to me to be very insolent and intemperate, and to have preferred this indictment through downright insolence, intemperance, and wantonness. For he seems, as it were, to have composed an enigma for the purpose of making an experiment. Whether will Socrates the wise know that I am jesting, and contradict myself, or shall I deceive him and all who hear me. For, in my opinion, he clearly contradicts himself in the indictment, as if he should say, Socrates is guilty of wrong in not believing that there are gods, and in believing that there are gods. And this, surely, is the act of one who is trifling.

Consider with me now, Athenians, in what respect he appears to me to say so. And do you, Melitus, answer me, and do ye, as I besought you at the outset, remember not to make an uproar if I speak after my usual manner.

Is there any man, Melitus, who believes that there are human affairs, but does not believe that there are men? Let him answer, judges, and not make so much noise. Is there anyone who does not believe that there are horses, but that there are things pertaining to horses? or who does not believe that there are pipers, but that there are things pertaining to pipes? There is not, O best of men! For since you are not willing to answer, I say it to you and to all here present. But answer to this at least: is there anyone who believes that there are things relating to demons, but does not believe that there are demons?
Melitus: There is not.

Socrates: How obliging you are in having hardly answered, though compelled by these judges! You assert, then, that I do believe and teach things relating to demons, whether they be new or old; therefore, according to your admission, I do believe in things relating to demons, and this you have sworn in the bill of indictment. If, then, I believe in things relating to demons, there is surely an absolute necessity that I should believe that there are demons. Is it not so? It is. For I suppose you assent, since you do not answer. But with respect to demons, do we not allow that they are gods, or the children of gods? Do you admit this or not?

Melitus: Certainly.

Socrates: Since, then, I allow that there are demons, as you admit, if demons are a kind of gods, this is the point in which I say you speak enigmatically and divert yourself in saying that I do not allow there are gods, and again that I do allow there are, since I allow that there are demons? But if demons are the children of gods, spurious ones, either from nymphs or any others, of whom they are reported to be, what man can think that there are sons of gods, and yet that there are not gods? For it would be just as absurd if anyone would think that there are mules, the offspring of horses and asses, but should not think that there are horses and asses. However, Melitus, it cannot be otherwise than that you have preferred this indictment for the purpose of trying me, or because you were at loss what real crime to allege against me; for that you should persuade any man who has the smallest degree of sense that the same person can think there are things relating to demons and to gods, and yet that there are neither demons, nor gods, nor heroes, is utterly impossible.⁴

This shows in a clear way the weapon that Socrates had wielded against so many of his contemporaries. It is, in fact, a fine example of the dialectical method: first the establishment of a class; then the drawing out of implications; and finally the exposure of the contradiction. As far as pure logic goes, it is undeniably convincing; yet after all, this is not the way in which one talks about one's belief in the gods. The very rationality of it suggests some lack of organic feeling. It has about it something of the look of a trap or a trick, and one can imagine hearers not very sympathetic to the accused saying to themselves: "There is Socrates up to his old tricks again. That is the way he got into trouble. He is showing that he will never be any different." We may imagine that the mean and sullen Melitus, his interlocutor at this point—nothing good is intended of him here—was pleased rather than otherwise that Socrates was conducting himself so true to form. It underscored the allegations that were implied in the indictment.

This is not the only kind of argument offered by Socrates in his defense, it is true. In fact this particular argument is followed by a noble one based upon analogy, in which he declared that just as he would not desert the station he was commanded to guard while he was a soldier, so he would not give up his duty of being a gadfly to the men of Athens, which role he felt had been assigned him by the gods. Yet there is in the Apology, as a whole, enough of the clever dialectician—of the man who is concerned merely with logical inferences—to bring to the minds of the audience the side of Socrates which had aroused enmity.

The issue comes to a focus on this: Socrates professed to be a teacher of virtue, but his method of teaching it did not commend itself to all people. Now we come to the possibility that they had some justice on their side, apart from the forms which the clash took in this particular trial. We have noted that Socrates had derided poets and politicians; and

to these the rhetoricians must be added, for despite the equivocal attitude taken toward rhetoric in the *Phaedrus*, Socrates rarely lost an opportunity for a sally against speechmakers. The result of his procedure was to make the dialectician appear to stand alone as the professor of wisdom and to exclude certain forms of cognition and expression which have a part in holding a culture together. It is not surprising that to the practitioners of these arts, his dialectic looked overgrown, even menacing. In truth it does require an extreme stand to rule out poetry, politics, and rhetoric. The use of a body of poetry in expressing the values of a culture will not be questioned except by one who takes the radical view presented by Plato in Book III of the *Republic*. But Socrates says in an early part of the *Apology* that when he went to the poets, he was ashamed to find that there was hardly a man present “who could not speak better than they about the poems they themselves had composed.” But speak how? Poets are often lamentably poor dialecticians if you drag them away from their poetry and force them to use explicit discourse; however, if they are good poets, they show reasoning power enough for their poetry and contribute something to the mind of which dialectic is incapable: feeling and motion.

The art of politics, although it often repels us in its degraded forms, cannot be totally abandoned in favor of pure speculation. Politics is a practical art. As such, it is concerned with man as a spatiotemporal creature; hence some political activity must take the form of compromise and adjustment. There is a certain relativism in it as a process, which fact is entailed by the *conditio humana*. But dialectic itself can stray too far from the human condition, as Pericles no doubt could have told him. We need not question that Socrates was an incomparably better man than most of the politicians who ruled Athens. He makes the point himself, however, that had he entered public life, he would have been proceeded against much earlier. That may well have been true, yet one can hardly conclude from its likelihood that human society can do without political leadership. It may be granted too that the men of Athens needed to learn from his dialectic; still they could not have depended upon it exclusively. The trend of Socrates’ remarks, here and elsewhere, is that dialectic is sufficient for all the needs of man.

The fact that Socrates had excited the rhetoricians against him is a point of special significance for our argument. We have noted that he liked to indulge in raillery against speechmakers. Now it is one thing to attack those who make verbal jugglery their stock-in-trade, but it is another to attack rhetoric as an art. This is the matter over which the *Phaedrus* arrives at its point of hesitation: Can rhetoric be saved by being divorced from those methods and techniques which are merely seductive? The answer which is given in the *Phaedrus* can be regarded as ambiguous. At the end of the dialogue the rhetorician seems to wind up, by the force of the argument, a dialectician. But no reader can be unaware that Plato has made extensive use of his great rhetorical skill to buttress his case, to help it over certain places, and to make it more persuasive. His instinct in practice told him that rhetoric must supply something that dialectic lacks. This calls for looking further at the nature of rhetoric.

Rhetoric is designed to move men’s feelings in the direction of a goal. As such, it is concerned not with abstract individuals, but with men in being. Moreover, these men in being it has to consider in relation to forces in being. Rhetoric begins with the assumption that man is born into
history. If he is to be moved, the arguments addressed to him must have historicity as well as logicality. To explain: when Aristotle opens his discussion of rhetoric in the celebrated treatise of that name, he asserts that it is a counterpart of dialectic. The two are distinguished by the fact that dialectic always tries to discover the real syllogism in the argument whereas rhetoric tries to discover the real means of persuasion. From this emerges a difference of procedure, in which dialectic makes use of inductions and syllogisms, whereas rhetoric makes use of examples and enthymemes. In fact, Aristotle explicitly calls the use of example “rhetorical induction,” and he calls the enthymeme the “rhetorical syllogism.” This bears out our idea that rhetoric must be concerned with real or historical situations, although dialectic can attain its goal in a self-existing realm of discourse. Now the example is something taken from life, and the force of the example comes from the fact that it is or was. It is the thing already possessed in experience and so it is the property of everyone through the sharing of a common past. Through examples, the rhetorician appeals to matters that everybody has in a sense participated in. These are the possible already made the actual, and the audience is expected to be moved by their historicity.

The relation of rhetoric to “things-in-being” appears even more closely in the “rhetorical syllogism.” The enthymeme, as students of logic learn, is a syllogism with one of the propositions missing. The reason the missing proposition is omitted is that it is presumed to exist already in the mind of the one to whom the argument is addressed. The rhetorician simply recognizes the wide acceptance of this proposition and assumes it as part of his argument. Propositions which can be assumed in this manner are settled beliefs, standing convictions, and attitudes of the people.

They are the “topics” to which he goes for his sources of persuasion.

Through employment of the enthymeme, the rhetorician enters into a solidarity with the audience by tacitly agreeing with one of its perceptions of reality. This step of course enables him to pass on to his conclusion. If the rhetorician should say, “The magistrate is an elected official and must therefore heed the will of the people,” he would be assuming a major premise, which is that “all elected officials must heed the will of the people.” That unsupplied, yet conceded proposition, gives him a means by which he can obtain force for his argument. Therefore, quite as in the case of the example, he is resorting to something already acknowledged as “actual.”

Aristotle continues his discussion of the two methods by pointing out that some persons cannot be reached by mere instruction. By the term “instruction” he signifies something of the order of logical demonstration. “Further, in dealing with certain persons, even if we possessed the most accurate scientific knowledge, we should not find it easy to persuade them by such knowledge. For scientific discourse is concerned with instruction, but in the case of such persons instruction is impossible; our proofs and arguments must rest on generally accepted principles, as we said in the *Topics*, when speaking of converse with the multitude.”

This also puts dialectic in a separate, though adjunct, realm. The mere demonstration of logical connections is not enough to persuade the commonalty, who instead have to be approached through certain “places” or common perceptions of reality. It is these, as we have now seen, which rhetoric assumes in its enthymemes, taking the ordi-

nary man’s understanding of things and working from that to something that needs to be made evident and compulsive. As for dialectic, if the motive for it is bad, it becomes sophistry; if it is good, it becomes a scientific demonstration, which may lie behind the rhetorical argument, but which is not equivalent to it.

In sum, dialectic is epistemological and logical; it is concerned with discriminating into categories and knowing definitions. While this has the indispensable function of promoting understanding in the realm of thought, by its very nature it does not tell man what he must do. It tells him how the terms and propositions which he uses are related. It permits him to use the name of a species as a term without ever attending to whether the species exists and therefore is a force in being. That would be sufficient if the whole destiny of man were to know. But we are reminded that the end of living is activity and not mere cognition. Dialectic, though being rational and intellectual, simply does not heed the imperatives of living, which help give direction to the thought of the man of wisdom. The individual who makes his approach to life through dialectic alone does violence to life through his abstractive process. At the same time he makes himself antisocial because his discriminations are apart from the organic feeling of the community for what goes on. By this analysis the dialectician is only half a wise man and hence something less than a philosopher king, insomuch as he leaves out the urgent reality of the actual, with which all rulers and judges know they have to deal.

The conclusion of this is that a society cannot live without rhetoric. There are some things in which the group needs to believe which cannot be demonstrated to everyone rationally. Their acceptance is pressed upon us by a kind of moral imperative arising from the group as a whole. To put them to the test of dialectic alone is to destroy the basis of belief in them and to weaken the cohesiveness of society. Such beliefs always come to us couched in rhetorical terms, which tell us what attitudes to take. The crucial defect of dialectic alone is that it ends in what might be called social agnosticism. The dialectician knows, but he knows in a vacuum; or, he knows, but he is without knowledge of how to act. Unless he is sustained by faith at one end or the other—unless he embraced something before he began the dialectical process or unless he embraces it afterward—he remains an unassimilable social agnostic. Society does not know what to do with him because his very existence is a kind of satire or aspersion upon its necessity to act. Or, it does know what to do with him, in a very crude and unpleasant form: it will put him away. Those who have to cope with passing reality feel that neutrality is a kind of desertion. In addition to understanding, they expect a rhetoric of action, and we must concede them some claim to this.

In thus trying to isolate the pure dialectician, we have momentarily lost sight of Socrates. We recall, of course, that he did not in all of his acts evince this determination to separate himself from the life of his culture. He served the state loyally as a soldier, and he refused opportunity to escape after the state had condemned him. His reasoning, in some of its lines, supports the kind of identification with history which I am describing as that of the whole man. There is one telltale fact near the very end of his career which gives interesting if indirect confirmation that Socrates had his own doubts about the omniscience of dialectic. When Phaedo and his friends visited Socrates in the prison, they found him composing verses. A dream had
told him to “make music and work at it.” Previously he had supposed that philosophy was the highest kind of music, but now, near the time of his execution, being visited by the dream again, he obeyed literally by composing a hymn to the god whose festival had just been celebrated and by turning some stories of Aesop into verse. Perhaps this was a way of acknowledging that a part of his nature—the poetical, rhetorical part—had been too neglected as a result of his devotion to dialectic and of making a kind of atonement at the end.

Still, the indictment “too much of a dialectician” has not been quashed. The trial itself can be viewed as a supremely dramatic incident in a far longer and broader struggle between rationalism on the one hand and poetry and rhetoric (and belief) on the other. This conflict reappears in the later battle, between Hellenic philosophy with its strong rational bias and Christianity, which ended after centuries in sweeping victory for the latter. Christianity provided all that Greek dialectic left out. It spoke to the feelings, and what seems of paramount significance, it had its inception in an historical fact. The Christian always had the story of Jesus with which to start his homilies. He could argue from a fact, or at least what was accepted as one, and this at once put him on grounds to persuade. We may recall here Aristotle’s observation that in conversing with the multitude you do not aim at fresh scientific instruction; you rest your arguments upon generally accepted principles and beliefs, or broadly speaking, on things received. Practically, the victory of Christianity over Hellenic rationalism bears out the soundness of this insight. The Christians have worked through the poetry of their great allegory and through appeal to many facts as having happened, for example, the lives of the saints. Dialectic has been present, because it is never absent from rational discourse, but rhetoric and poetry were there to make up the winning combination.

Hellenic rationalism waned before man’s need for some kind of faith and before a pessimism about human nature which seems to develop as history lengthens. We have emphasized that dialectic leads toward an agnosticism of action. Even Socrates was constantly saying, “The one thing that I know is that I know nothing.” The fiercely positive Hebrew and Christian faiths contain nothing of this. As for the darker side of man’s nature, what can set this forth but a powerful rhetoric? Dialectic may prove it in a conditional way, but it is up to the elaboration and iteration of rhetoric to make it real and overwhelming. Dialectic alone leads to an unwarranted confidence, and this evidently is the reason that Nietzsche refers to Socrates as an “optimist.” If there is one thing which the great preachers of Christianity have inculcated, it is the proneness of man to fall. Without extensive use of the art of rhetoric, they would have been unable to accomplish this. The triumph and continuance of Christianity and Christian culture attest the power of rhetoric in holding men together and maintaining institutions. It is generally admitted that there is a strong element of Platonism in Christianity. But if Plato provided the reasoning, Paul and Augustine supplied the persuasion. What emerged from this could not be withstood even by the power of Rome.

One cannot doubt that the decay of this great support of Western culture is closely connected with the decline of rhetoric. I spoke earlier of a growing resentment against the orator. This resentment arises from a feeling, perhaps not

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5 This is also the point of the great tragedies written before Euripides, who, significantly, was the only tragedian that Socrates admired.
consciously articulated in many who possess it, that the orator is a teacher and a moral teacher at that. He cannot avoid being this if he uses words which will move men in a direction which he has chosen. But here is where the chief point of theoretical contention arises. There are persons today, some of them holding high positions in education, who believe (in theory, of course) that it is improper for any person to try to persuade another person. A name which has been invented for this act of persuading is “psychological coercion,” which is obviously itself a highly loaded rhetorical phrase. From some such notion have come the extraordinary doctrines of modern semantics. According to the followers of this movement, the duty of anyone using language is to express the “facts” and avoid studiously the use of emotional coloring. The very use of facts in this kind of context reveals an astonishing naivety about the nature of language. Yet there can be no doubt that this doctrine carries a great danger in that it represents a new attempt of dialectic to discredit and displace rhetoric. The writings of this group contain such a curious mélange of positivist dogma, modern prejudice, and liberal clichés that one runs a risk even in trying to digest it for purposes of analysis. Nevertheless, there are reasons for believing that it is in essence a new threat to fractionate society by enthroning dialectic as the only legitimate language of discourse.

The advocates of the “semantic” approach try to ascertain definitely the relationship between words and the things they stand for with the object of making signification more “scientific.” These semanticists believe generally that traditional speech is filled with terms which stand for nonexistent things, empty ideas, and primitive beliefs which get in the way of man’s adaptation to environment. For them the function of speech is communication, and communication should be about things that really are. (One cannot read their literature very long without sensing the strong political motivation that inspires their position. A considerable part of their writing is a more or less open polemic against those features of speech which they regard as reflecting or upholding our traditional form of society. At a level below this, but for the same reason, they are antimetaphysical.) Unless we can establish that the world we are talking about is the world that exists empirically, then, the semanticists feel, we had better not talk at all. They want a vocabulary that is purified of all terms that originate in the subjectivity of the user, or at least they want to identify all such terms and place them in a quarantine ward.

The attempt must be identified as a fresh eruption of pure dialectic because it is concerned primarily with defining. Just as Socrates tried to define “justice” or “love” by now widening, now narrowing the categories, so they try, in a supposedly scientific way, to make the term fit the thing. The two are not engaged in exactly the same quest, and I shall come to their difference later, but they are both relying exclusively upon accurate verbal identification of something that is by them considered objective. As Socrates searched for the pure idea, so they search for the expression of the pure thing or fact. Moreover, they regard this as having the same power of salvation as the archetypal idea.

The quest of semantics cannot succeed, because the very theory of it is fallacious. The connection between a word and what it stands for cannot be determined in the way that they seem to believe. They operate on the assumption that there is some extralinguistic way of deciding what a word should mean, some point outside language from
which one can judge the appropriateness of any choice of words for expression. The effort to get around language and to apply extralinguistic yardsticks is doomed to failure even in the cases of words symbolizing physical objects. A word stands for these things, but does not stand for them in the shape of the things. Language is a closed system, into which there is only one mode of entrance, and that is through meaning. And what a word means is going to be determined by the whole context of the vocabulary, with all the intermodification that this involves. A word does not get in through its fidelity to an object, but through its capacity to render what that object means to us.

But they do not even discriminate rightly the kinds of things for which words must stand. They assume that all words must stand for phenomena or things which are observable and classifiable by science. Indeed, this is their first principle: if a thing cannot be proved to exist scientifically—if it cannot be classified with phenomena—we are not supposed to bring it into expression at all, except in those relaxed moments when we are telling fairy stories and the like. Obviously they are ignoring the immensely important role of the subjective in life. There are numberless ideas, images, feelings, and intuitions which cannot be described and classified in the way of scientific phenomena but which have great effect upon our decisions. A rhetoric can take these into account, modify, direct, and use them because rhetoric deals in depth and tendency. A dialectic in the form of semantics cannot do this because it is interested only in defining words on the assumption that definitions are determined by the physical order. Just as the physical scientist discovers a law or a regularity in nature, so they endeavor to locate the source of terms in physical reality, and indeed their prime concern is to decide whether a referent really “exists.” On first thought this might seem to give them the kind of respect for the actual order that I have claimed for believers in history. But a distinction is necessary: history is not the simple data of the perceptive consciousness; it is the experience of man after this has been assimilated and worked upon by the spirit. The appeal to history is an appeal to events made meaningful, and the meaning of events cannot be conveyed through the simple empirical references that semantic analysis puts forward as an ideal. Hence it is that the semanticist too is a neutralist, who would say, “Here is the world expressed in language that has been freed from tendency and subjective coloration.” What is to be done with this world is postponed until another meeting, as it were, or it is assigned to a different kind of activity. His great mistake is the failure to see that language is intended to be sermonic. Because of its nature and of its intimacy with our feelings, it is always preaching. This type of agnostic will not listen to the sermon because he is unwilling to credit the existence of values. Yet even after it has been decided that the referent does exist, there is nothing to do with the word except turn it over to others whose horizons are not bounded by logical positivism.

This brings us to the necessity of concluding that the upholders of mere dialectic, whether they appear in this modern form or in another, are among the most subversive enemies of society and culture. They are attacking an ultimate source of cohesion in the interest of a doctrine which can issue only in nullity. It is of no service to man to impugn his feeling about the world qua feeling. Feeling is the source of that healthful tension between man and what is—both objectively and subjectively. If man could be brought to believe that all feeling about the world is wrong,
there would be nothing for him but collapse.

Socrates was saved from trivialization of their kind by his initial commitment to the Beautiful and the Good. He is also saved in our eyes by the marvelous rhetoric of Plato. These were not enough to save him personally in the great crisis of his life, but they give high seriousness to the quest which he represents. The modern exponents of dialectic have nothing like these to give respectability to their undertaking or persuasiveness to their cause. But both, in the long view, are the victims of supposing that definition and classification are sufficient as the ends of speech.

In a summing up we can see that dialectic, when not accompanied by a historical consciousness and responsibility, works to dissolve those opinions, based partly on feeling, which hold a society together. It tends, therefore, to be essentially revolutionary and without commitment to practical realities. It is even contumacious toward the "given," ignoring it or seeking to banish it in favor of a merely self-consistent exposition of ideas.

Rhetoric, on the other hand, tries to bring opinion into closer line with the truth which dialectic pursues. It is therefore cognizant of the facts of situations and it is at least understanding of popular attitudes.

There is a school of thinking, greatly influenced by the Socratic tradition, which holds that it is intellectually tenable to take popular opinion into account. The side that one espouses in this issue will be determined by his attitude toward creation. When we look upon the "given" of the world, we find two things: the world itself and the opinions which mankind has about the world. Both of these must be seen as parts of the totality. The world is a primary creation, and the opinions of men are creations of the men who live in it. Next the question becomes: can we regard the world as infinitely correctable and men's opinions of it as of no account? Socrates could do this because he believed in a god or gods. The world is by him from the beginning condemned; it is a prison house, a dark cave; it is the realm of becoming which is destined to pass away. All things tend toward realizing themselves in a godliness, at which time the mortal and earthly will have been shuffled off. A complete reliance upon dialectic becomes possible only if one accepts something like this Socratic theodicy. But the important point is that it denies the axiological status of creation.

The modern counterpart thinks he can affirm that creation is infinitely correctable because he believes only in man and speaks only on his behalf. When we examine his position, however, we find that he believes only in the natural order. This he reveals by his insistence upon positivistic proof for everything. But from the positive order he cannot draw the right inferences about man. He can find no place for those creations like affections and opinions which are distinctly human and which are part of the settlement of any culture. For him an opinion, instead of being a stage of historical consciousness which may reflect a perfectly bona fide if narrow experience, is just an impediment in the way of the facts. His dialectic would move toward the facts and seek to destroy that which holds the facts in a cohesive picture. On his principle a cohesive or systematized outlook must involve distortion, and this explains why he automatically refers to rhetoric as "propaganda."

In brief the dialectician of our day has no adequate theory of man. Lacking such a theory, he of course cannot find a place for rhetoric, which is the most humanistic of all the disciplines. Rhetoric speaks to man in his whole
being and out of his whole past and with reference to values which only a human being can intuit. The semanti-
cists have in view only a denatured speech to suit a dena-
tured man. Theirs is a major intellectual error, committed
by supposing that they were going to help man by bringing
language under the surveillance of science.

There is never any question that rhetoric ultimately will
survive this scientific attack. The pity is that the attacks
should ever have been made at all since, proceeding from
contempt for history and ignorance of the nature of man,
they must produce confusion, skepticism, and inaction. In
the restored man dialectic and rhetoric will go along hand
in hand as the regime of the human faculties intended that
they should do. That is why the recovery of value and of
community in our time calls for a restatement of the
broadly cultural role of rhetoric.